

Phoebe: Spirit of the Past, Light to the Present

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Anyone researching the lives of most African Americans before 1865 will face a difficult task. Free heads of household started to be documented in the United States with the first federal census of 1790, but the census of 1870 was the first one to list all African Americans by name. Enslaved persons were not allowed to own real property, so records such as land deeds are not an option for this detective work, either.

That leaves other primary sources such as diaries, letters, birth and death records, baptism records, and store accounts. Many churches, plantations, and other business enterprises maintained such records, but finding them can be a tedious process. Investigating plantation and church records, though, can pull back the curtain on some of these socially bound lives. Too often, some historians have treated enslaved persons as mere objects—without families or lives outside of labor. When we dig deeper, we can find real people with multifaceted lives.

Such is the case with a woman named Phoebe, who was born, lived, and died before her people were included in U.S. census records. Such is the richness of some church records available to modern researchers—in this case, those of the Moravian church in Forsyth County’s town of Salem. The Moravians are a Christian denomination that began in eastern Europe during the late 1300s. This group started to settle in what was then Stokes County in 1753, calling its entire settlement tract Wachovia.

The search for more information on Phoebe began when she was mentioned, along with her husband, Bodney, in several secondary reports and publications on Africans and African Americans among Moravians in North Carolina. Her name alone raised many questions. Where was she born? How many children did she and her husband have? Could any descendants be identified today? Careful primary source research began to provide some answers.

Phoebe was born around 1771, according to Moravian records—*where* remains unknown. North Carolina historian Peter Wood has written that “Phiba” (sometimes spelled with two b’s) was an African “day name”—a name given to a child according to the day of the week on which he or she was born. It is likely that this “Phiba” was born in west or central Africa on a Friday; captured and shipped to the United States; sold in a coastal slave market in Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; or Georgetown, South Carolina; transported to Stokes (later Forsyth) County up the Pee Dee/Yadkin River; and resold to a farmer named John Puryear. She might have been baptized in another Christian denomination before being sold to the Moravians. When her husband, Bodney, died in January 1829, the Moravians’ church diary indicated that he had been a communicant member of the church for more than twenty years. (Communicant members were those who had been baptized and received Communion as adults; people had to undergo

weeks of church instruction before being eligible for Communion.)

Records confirm that many of the people enslaved by Moravians in the 1700s were native Africans. Early trading tended to be toward the south, as Salisbury was the county seat of government until Surry and Stokes counties were formed later in the century. The Moravians generally gave new Christian names, or added Christian names, to their enslaved persons' given names (enslaved people did not have surnames, or last names) when they were baptized as adults. For example, an African named Hercules might be given the name Peter, or an African called Frank might become Frank Emanuel. It is not clear when or where Phoebe and Bodney were baptized. We are not sure whether anyone altered their names.

The Moravians of Salem purchased Phoebe's family—including Bodney and two of their children, Caty and Emanuel; Phoebe was expecting a baby at the time—in 1809 from Puryear's estate. The church bought their older children over the next few years from various sources—in effect, reuniting the family. Research pulled this information from slave chattels or deeds in Moravian archives. These chattels served as proof of transfer of ownership in human property, much like land transfers. In some states, slave chattels had to be filed in public records. North Carolina was not one of those states, so finding these deeds is uncommon. The Moravians, being great record keepers, have several in their archives.

Phoebe gave birth to at least nine children between about 1796 and 1813, according to Moravian birth and baptism registers; four children are known to have survived past the 1870 census. Her last child, Peter, died the day after his birth in 1813 and was buried in God's Acre, the Moravian graveyard in Salem. Just three years later, the church segregated its burials by race. That same year, Dr. Frederick Schuman, the new Moravian doctor, brought enslaved persons to live on a farm just east of Salem, a mile or two from the slave quarter where enslaved people owned by the Moravian church itself lived. (At this time, Moravian leaders did not want any more enslaved people living in town.) What once was Schuman's farm became an African American community known today as Happy Hill. Some of Phoebe's descendants would later own property in this very settlement.

When the church decided to form a separate African congregation in 1822, Phoebe and her husband became two of its first three members. According to Moravian community diaries, the first meeting of this congregation took place at Phoebe and Bodney's cabin on the slave quarter, which Bodney managed. (This was an unusual role for an enslaved person at that time, in comparison to nonchurch plantations in the area.) The slave quarter lay outside Salem near the present-day National Register Historic District of Belview in the Waughtown community of Winston-Salem.

When North Carolina native David Walker published *Walker's Appeal* in Boston in September 1829, Phoebe, by then a widow, had only one child left who was not married—her youngest son, Lewis, the baby born in 1809. As Walker's fiery antislavery pamphlet started to circulate in the South, North Carolina was one of three southern states that held emergency legislative sessions to enact new laws governing its enslaved population. The German pastor of the African Church informed his congregation in January 1830 of the new laws. He urged them to use well what they had already learned. The Moravians had been teaching enslaved people to read through the

church Sunday school, but this practice now had become illegal.

In October 1836 several persons enslaved by Dr. Schuman, along with a few others, attended a special service at the African Church to bless their emancipation and departure for Liberia, West Africa. Research shows that it is very likely that Phoebe attended this service, as she was one of few communicant members (versus attendees) of the congregation. She was likely joined by several of her children and grandchildren, as those attending the church appear to have been a rather tight-knit group, according to Moravian primary documents. Her grandson, Ned, enslaved to Moravian Henry A. Lemly, was about six years old at the time. The church became a focal point of African American life, with people attending from throughout Wachovia. A brick church replaced the original log building in 1861 after Phoebe's death; it became known as St. Philips Church decades later.

Phoebe may have been infirm in her later years. She did not appear to get out much, as her name appears less often in the church diary. She eventually moved in with her older daughter, Betsy, and received a pension from the Moravian church. There is no indication that the Moravians ever set Phoebe free. Her children were enslaved in households bearing the last names of Blum, Byerly, Fries, Foltz, Holland, and Lemly. After 1865, and especially during the taking of the 1870 census, many freedmen (previously enslaved persons) simply used their last enslaver's surname as their own. Census records do not generally make clear the relationships among those with different surnames. Other primary sources, however, allow researchers to track this family in an unbroken line to the present day.

It is only through primary sources that we can discover and tell more of Phoebe's story. Her story should motivate us to seek further details on African Americans during the period of enslavement in this country. By learning more about them, we can become better equipped to discover more about their descendants.

Phoebe's memorial service took place at the "large" church (now called Home Moravian) in August 1861; she was buried in the second African graveyard in Salem, at the corner of Cemetery Street and Salem Avenue. Her gravestone, visible today, has the letters WA above her name. The WA stands for "Wachovia Administration," the property-owning entity of the Moravians. One researcher in the 1970s—evidently understanding little about the Moravians or slavery—documented this grave as that of William A. Phoebe.

*At the time of this article's publication, Mel White was a consultant and independent researcher. For more information on his work, access www.aaancestorsnc.com.

Minnie Lemly: Bridge between Phoebe and Georgianna

Oral history—combined with census, tax, and other public records—can be critical in bridging the gap between enslaved ancestors and their modern-day descendants. This is the case with Phoebe, whose story can be told through other kinds of primary sources, and her family. Sometimes a researcher and a family can help each other fill in the gaps.

My research into African American history around the Salem area led naturally to what is now called Happy Hill. As a freedman, Edward “Ned” Lemly, Phoebe’s grandson, was the first person to purchase a lot from the Moravians in 1872 in this community, formerly a Salem farm. He is buried in the second African graveyard in Salem, where Phoebe had been buried thirty years before. Ned’s wife, Alice, was buried in the Happy Hill cemetery about a quarter century after his death. Ned and Alice’s daughter, Minnie Lemly, was born ca. 1883. This part of the family tree can be traced using census and land records.

And this is where oral history helped connect the dots. Oral history for too long existed in the shadows of other primary sources. It has recently taken its rightful place as a legitimate tool in genealogical and historical research. Oral history, for example, helped resolve the interpretative challenge involving Thomas Jefferson and the enslaved Sally Hemings at the Monticello historic site in Charlottesville, Virginia.

African history has been passed down orally for centuries by *gurus*, or storytellers, and that tradition—although diminished somewhat in the United States today—remains relatively strong in many African American communities. Couple this with a census practice that ignored enslaved persons as individuals for the first eighty years of national record keeping, and the importance of the oral tradition becomes apparent. The story of Phoebe’s family demonstrates how time periods merge and effective research methods start to change for African Americans, because of their changing social status. The constant that remained through enslavement, emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow was the oral tradition. It can be critically important.

One of many people interviewed as part of Happy Hill oral history research was Georgianna Page McCoy, born in 1933 on Happy Hill to Edith Lemly Page and Sherman Page. She knew her grandfather, Ed, and even some of the African Americans who still carried the Fries surname like some of Phoebe’s children and grandchildren did. But Georgianna didn’t know about Phoebe.

She had no idea that she had ancestors who had been enslaved in Salem. Her father had worked for the “large” Moravian church there. Georgianna knew others who worked in the kitchen, dining hall, or laundry at Salem College. She herself had attended Sunday school classes as a child at the old African Church in Salem. Yet she did not make a connection among her family, Salem, and slavery. She had heard of her great-grandparents, Ned and Alice, but knew little about their lives. This is not unusual. Many African Americans born into slavery who survived to know freedom did not want to talk about their enslavement. For them, it was a nightmare that had ended.

Georgianna recalled that Minnie Lemly, her grandmother, was among the youngest of several siblings, and that Minnie gave birth to Georgianna’s mother, Edith, at age twenty-three. Minnie

passed Edith to her brother, Ed, to raise, moved away from North Carolina shortly thereafter, and was rarely heard from again. Ed and his wife, Augusta, had no children. They gladly raised Edith as their own.

From my work with church documents, I knew that Minnie's grandfather, Emanuel, or "Man" as he was often called, was quite active within the African Moravian congregation in Salem. He appears to have been well respected among the area's enslaved, and later free, residents, as evidenced by his numerous baptism sponsorships between 1832 and 1869. (These sponsorships included Minnie's cousin, Edward Francis, and her older brother, George.) Man and his brother, Lewis, also were present at a meeting in the African Moravian church in August 1867—a few years after the death of their mother, Phoebe—to discuss the location of the area's first school for African Americans.

Georgianna provided the link to the modern day—the light-bulb moment—when she spoke of her Lemly relatives.

Educated in Forsyth County, Georgianna graduated from Winston-Salem Teachers College (now Winston-Salem State University). She taught in Charlotte briefly before returning to Forsyth County, where she taught at several schools, including Anderson and Paisley, before spending the last several years of her career at Southwest Elementary and retiring in 1992.

She often comments on how much richer she could have made her students' field trips to Old Salem had she known then that she was walking in the footsteps of her own ancestor, Phoebe. Primary source research filled a void in her history.